

## EXITING IN STYLE

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### **Chalice:**

We light our chalice  
Fragment of stars and sun  
To light our hopes and dreams,  
To make a way for peace and love.

**Opening Words:** “The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right time, but also to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

Words are important to me. A finely tuned phrase. The perfect expression. The unexpectedly worded line. I was raised by a mother who insisted—insisted—on proper English and properly pronounced English, so I suppose I have her to blame or credit for my love of words. I like knowing the derivations of words and knowing the meanings of every part of a word. I love the rules of grammar even.

Maybe that explains in part why I love to read so much. And why I detest reading a poorly-written novel. I expect the author to have spent agonizing hours going over and over each word, each phrase, to ensure it was just the right way to express herself.

In my 12<sup>th</sup> grade English class, I remember Mrs. Mann reading, “these are the times that try man’s souls.” And then she had the class write the same sentiment using their own words. “These are really rough times.” “Man, it was tough back then.” “Life wasn’t easy in those days.” Until we all came to understand that “these are the times that try man’s souls.” was the most perfect way to state that sentiment.

How words are arranged can move us to tears, can make us laugh with an unexpected twist in meaning, can stop us in our tracks and make us see things in a whole new light.

And, that’s where I’m going with all this today—the importance of the right words.

Unfortunately, I'm not particularly adept at finding just the right phrase to express my meaning. At least—not until days after the need for that well-turned phrase has passed. One of the many reasons that I applaud the arrival of the concept of sending messages by e-mail is that it is no longer necessary to find a new way of opening or closing a letter to someone. I can just write two lines and hit SEND. No fancy words are needed. Speed, efficiency, -- just saying what you want to say and click SEND.

I used to love to write long letters. That is, I loved to write the middle part of letters. But how to start one? I'd write, "Dear Mother", and then I'd sit there for half an hour writing nothing, trying to figure out what to say next. Eventually, I'd write, "I'm fine. How are you?" Not very scintillating.

And then the same thing at the end of the letter. I wanted to end with something that kind of summed it all up or that left the reader with something memorable or witty. I never could do it. So, e-mails are a godsend for me.

I think it's the same with most people. We all want to say goodbye with a pithy little phrase that says we're done with whatever we were saying or doing and now we're headed home. You can't just stop talking and turn and leave. That's why we hear so many "Have a nice day!"s when we're saying goodbye to each other. In the grocery store, the check out clerk hands me my change and says, "Have a nice day!" The faceless voice on the other end of the phone when I call to pay a bill with VISA says, "Have a nice day!"

It's a lovely expression that's meant to show concern and some interest in my well-being, but it has become so banal. For awhile people were trying to put a new twist on it by saying, "Make it a good one!" That was nice. For awhile. It implied that it was up to me to make my day good. But eventually, that became over-used as well.

"Have a good day." "Make it a good one." "Yeah, you, too." It's an automatic thing you say without any thought to what it means.

It's like closing a letter when you say goodbye to someone. You want to leave them with a nice thought but something that also winds up the conversation and you can gracefully sign your name and walk out the door.

You can't say, "God be with you", or "The Force be with you." That sounds too much like the other guy has a terminal illness and needs God's or the Force's protection. "I'll see you later" suggests you actually will see them later, which may not be the case at all for store clerks or voices on the phone.

For that matter, I probably don't even want to see that person later, if ever, but I say it anyway.

Recently, I've been dealing with people who sell chairs to churches. They invariably end the phone conversation with, "Have a blessed day." I very nearly crawl down the phone line and strangle them. "Blessed day" indeed! It conjures up images of my walking around all day surrounded by angels and hearing chords on an organ in the background. Not a pleasant thought.

You can't end a conversation with anything too deep and meaningful because that runs the risk of the other guy wanting to stay around and discuss what you've just said and then you're stuck with coming up with something new to say when you finally go your separate ways.

Mr. Spock's "Live well and prosper" was a good goodbye line if you weren't going to see the person for a long time, but it also meant you had to know how to do that finger thing Spock always did.

You could be like Robin Williams when he played Ork. When he left anyone, he'd say, "Nanu, nanu." Nobody knew what it meant, so you could read into it whatever you needed. Maybe we should all have our own unintelligible phrase we say that indicates we're walking out the door or hanging up the phone. At least it would be different with every person that said goodbye to us so it wouldn't get trite so quickly.

Here's another idea that I think could work—maybe in saying goodbye we could leave people with a fortune cookie. Of course, this would only work in face to face situations. People would open up the cookie after you'd left and it'd say whatever you'd written in it.

It would mark a definite point of termination to any encounter. Let's set aside the problem of having to carry a large supply of fortune cookies everywhere with you. And, of course the issue of re-gifting could be another matter to struggle with. There's a much bigger problem we need to wrestle with.---

Fortune cookies today are not what fortune cookies of long ago were. They just don't make them like they used to. They are just another instance of phrases becoming so overused that you don't even hear them anymore. I should credit Meg Barnhouse with reminding me of this one. Meg is a writer. You may have seen her article two years ago in UU World on fortune cookies.

Remember how you used to enjoy reading your fortune after eating Chinese? You'd read yours out loud and everyone at the table would say how that fit you or didn't. Well, nowadays, your fortune says just the most meaningless things. "Too many cooks spoil the broth." "Start each day with a smile." What can you do with a fortune like that? It's not a fortune. It's a tired old cliché. It doesn't predict something that's going to happen to me. When I open a fortune cookie, I want an honest-to-goodness fortune. I want that fortune cookie to know who I am and what I need and give me some direction. Is that too much to ask of some sugar and butter and soy bean? I think not.

I want that cookie to tell me something new. Something to get me excited about the future. Of course, I also would like that cookie to taste good, and apparently, that's not going to happen anytime soon. Don't Chinese realize that a creamy chocolate mint tastes better than hard and stale?

Wouldn't it be great if you opened up a fortune cookie and it said, "Tomorrow you will find a new friend." All next day you'd be looking at people in a new light trying to find out which person was going to be your friend. You'd end up being especially nice to everyone just in case that person was the one. The new friend.

Or how about, "Next week a door of opportunity opens and you will walk through it." Now, there are doors of opportunity opening the time, but now that the fortune cookie has reminded you of it, you'll be looking for something instead of trudging the same old path.

And, most importantly, you'll actually walk through that door of opportunity instead of walking past it like always. And who knows what wonderful exciting opportunity will await you?

Or how about, "You are secretly adored by four people." How intriguing! You start looking around at everyone you know wondering if they're one of your secret adorers. You know that they like you, but do they secretly adore you? Wouldn't you pay closer attention to people if you were looking for information like that?

We hear advice from people we know all the time. "Grow up." "Quit complaining." "Don't tell me what to do." "Exercise more." Lots of stuff you really don't want to hear. Negatives. A fortune cookie can't do that. A fortune cookie should be positive and hopeful. Who wants to read a fortune that says, "If you don't stop smoking, you'll die a horrible death." "If you don't stop complaining, no one will like you."

We need fortune cookies that say, "Go for a walk and you'll find what you've been looking for." Or, "People find you very attractive and interesting."

I think it'd be fun to go into the business of selling fortune cookies. With really good fortunes in them. Positive hopeful fortunes. Maybe include some UU Seven Principles in our fortunes. "You are important to the interdependent web of all existence."

The fortunes would need to excite the imagination, shine a light on new possibilities, shift the reader's perspective a tiny bit, bring hope for change for the better.

Let me just say, for the record, that I realize, very clearly, that fortune telling and reading fortune cookies is nonsense. After all, we make our own fortunes, don't we—good or bad? A piece of paper in a tasteless cookie can't really tell you what's about to happen to you. I know all that.

But that's not really the point. Reading a fortune is just another method of jarring you out of your current thinking and setting you going in a whole new direction. One would hope—in a better direction. That's why it's so important that fortune cookies do indeed do what they're meant to do.

No meaningless dry bit of fluff that you crumple up and throw away. No inane bit of nothingness. A fortune needs to be a wake up call. A new thought. A rousing bugle blast.

Have you got your creative juices flowing? Because, I'll need your help writing these. Remember, as the fortune cookie says, "Thirty minds are better than one."

So, here's the plan. I'd like you to imagine yourself in a Chinese restaurant. You've had a wonderful meal. The waitress breaks you your fortune cookie. You're ready to break it open to read your fortune. What would you want it to say? What words could stop you in your tracks and turn you around in a better direction? (I'm giving you a fortune cookie. Open it, read the fortune, eat the cookie. Let it serve as a bad example.)

[After fortunes are written, and read aloud]

I looked up on the internet how to make a fortune cookie. It appears the secret to making them in your own kitchen is to make one—maybe two—little cookies at a time. You make a very thin square of dough—just one, maybe two—and bake it.

Take it out of the oven, and, in a blur of speed before it can cool and harden—and the recipe suggests that 10 seconds is your window of opportunity—you have to slip the message in and twist the cookie into its little fortune shape. Then, you do that over and over again until you give up and go to a Chinese restaurant and read their cookies.

Or, you can go on-line and order your own personal message put in a dozen fortune cookies for the mere cost of \$200 per dozen. Sounds like a deal!

So, I guess my idea of going into business making fortune cookies isn't going to happen.

The best I can hope for is that you will think about all of this, so that the next time you have to say goodbye to someone, you'll be ready. Let's not hear any more "have a nice day!"'s.

**CLOSING:** May you have warm words on a cold evening,  
A full moon on a dark night,  
And the road downhill all the way to your door.